

# The Denver Post

## Jazz Aspen Snowmass riffs on different music styles

By Ricardo Baca  
Denver Post Pop Music Critic

**Friday, September 03, 2004** - Most people unfamiliar with Jazz Aspen Snowmass look at this weekend's performers - Sheryl Crow, Steve Miller Band, Jack Johnson, David Byrne, Lucinda Williams, Lyle Lovett, Cake and BR549 - and wonder what exactly puts the jazz in Jazz Aspen Snowmass.

To answer the confusion, we look toward the future.

Jazz Aspen Snowmass, an organization that holds festivals, academies and activities in Aspen year round, is expanding Memorial Day to include a festival in California - Sonoma Jazz +.

"The reason for the plus sign is to answer this very long discussion," said Jim Horowitz, founder, president and executive producer of Jazz Aspen Snowmass. "It's jazz, plus more."

The Labor Day festival is Jazz Aspen Snowmass' jab at the pop-and-folk mainstream in an open-air concert venue. It dates to 1995, four years after Jazz Aspen Snowmass' original festival started. The original festival with the real jazz comes in June, when the town hosts acts including Wynton Marsalis, Natalie Cole, Al Green, Buddy Guy, Diana Krall, Tony Bennett, Santana, B.B. King, Bonnie Raitt, Herbie Hancock and Diane Reeves in a more traditional, tented sit-down venue. Even then, not all of the artists are playing jazz, but there's an aesthetic vein that's being followed.

"This industry is led by Europe and what happens in the major European festivals," Horowitz said. "The first jazz festival was in Newport in '54, but it really started to hit its stride in Europe in late '50s and early '60s."

"Now they've become these multiplatform, diverse music festivals. I once read a quote where someone said, 'Jazz festivals these days are less about jazz per se than about quality music,' and that's right on."

"Ultimately it's a survival technique."

# The Denver Post

review

## Aspen festival feeling no chill

By Ricardo Baca  
Denver Post Pop Music Critic

Sunday, September 05, 2004 -

**Snowmass** - After the first two days of Jazz Aspen Snowmass, the trend is obvious: the music is heating up as the weather's cooling down.

Friday night's pre-packaged bill of Jack Johnson, G. Love & Special Sauce and Donavon Frankenreiter, although it set a festival attendance record with more than 11,000 concertgoers, didn't compare to Saturday night, which rocked with headliner Sheryl Crow, David Byrne and about 9,000 attendees.

Even though Saturday's rain forced Byrne to cut his set short and not play with his six-person orchestra, and a cold kept Crow from playing at full-steam, Saturday was still a quality day.

Friday's crowd was happiest when Johnson was rocking his hits. "Flake" had Johnson's careful mix of reggae and folk at an expected high. "Wasting Time" was consistent with his vibe, as was his cover of Sublime's "Bad Fish."

"Rodeo Clowns" came at the concert's end and had G. Love joining the fold. (The track originally appeared on G. Love's "Philadelphonic" and featured Johnson.)

Both songs were polished with the sparse presentation of Johnson's three-piece band, but they also revealed the singer-surfer-songwriter's weakness. He's a one-note singer, and his songs, although filled with masterful alliteration and imagery, possess too much sameness.

Meanwhile, David Byrne has built a career on being the anti-norm. Sadly, it was rainy at his 4:15 start time Saturday, and by 5:20 organizers made the call for Byrne to play a shortened, 40-minute set sans the Tosca Strings that are his backing band.

He opened with the Talking Heads classic "Road to Nowhere" and moved along briskly to "She Only Sleeps," a new track off his excellent "Grown Backwards" disc, and "Buck Naked." His voice was in peak form on the Talking Heads classics "(Nothing But) Flowers," "Once in a Lifetime" and "And She Was."

Although this was obviously an impromptu performance with Byrne, a bassist and two percussionists piecing together a set list they could play without the strings.

the classic frontman worked through the too- short set with a sense of class and dignity that seemed at home in the exclusive mountain resort town.

"Sorry about the weather," he concluded softly. "But we'll come back."

About 40 minutes later, Crow launched into her 90-minute set with "Steve McQueen" and the soundtrack cut "Members Only." After admitting to feeling under the weather, she talked of a wild plane ride, diverted from Aspen's Pitkin County Airport to DIA, and later brought out her fiancée, cyclist Lance Armstrong, and his son, Luke, before playing an encore made up of Joe Walsh's "Walk Away" and her own "There Goes the Neighborhood."

You could tell she was under the weather when she would back off her mic during upper- register portions of "If It Makes You Happy" and "Every Day is a Winding Road," but it was never bad.

And, sure, it was an all-hits set, but she rewarded the crowd with a twangy "Strong Enough," a practiced cover of Cat Stephens' "The First Cut is the Deepest" and her new track inspired by George Harrison's death, "Light In Your Eyes."

The festival continues today and Monday with performances by Lyle Lovett, the Steve Miller Band, Robert Randolph & the Family Band, Cake and Lucinda Williams.

*Pop music critic Ricardo Baca can be reached at 303-820-1394 or [rbaca@denverpost.com](mailto:rbaca@denverpost.com).*

# The Denver Post

## Miller, friends in form at Aspen

By Ricardo Baca  
Denver Post Staff Writer

**Monday, September 06, 2004 - Snowmass** - Jazz Aspen Snowmass' rock- and pop- based Labor Day festival was started in the mid-'90s as an afterthought to its original festival, which plays in June and finds its rooting in jazz and adult contemporary.

But Day Three of the current, more mainstream festival got a healthy dose of jazz Sunday when headliner Steve Miller brought out accomplished jazzman John Handy to join his psychedelic fold. The jazz alto saxophonist, eagerly playing the blues on tracks such as Junior Wells' "Snatch It Back and Hold It" and Freddie King's "I'm Tore Down," elevated the Steve Miller Band's show beyond the level of a bigger-than-life arena-rock bar- blues band.

Handy's stint with Miller (and the expected joking and rocking that followed) was the highlight Sunday at Jazz Aspen Snowmass. Miller, looking more average than your dad on a Sunday, owned the nostalgia-hungry crowd. With a conservative haircut and a generic sport coat, he took his many fans "from Phoenix, Arizona, all the way to Tacoma" with a voice that sailed and sounded as fresh as it did in his heyday.

Some songs, including "Take the Money and Run" with its sharp "whoo-hoos" and its über-crisp lead vocals, came off a tad sanitary and too practiced. Most of his songs were meant to be slurred and played with an implied imperfection. And while that aesthetic was maintained through most of the 1-hour, 40-minute set, including the closing threesome of "Jungle Love," "Jet Airliner" and "The Joker," they sometimes played it too close to the written note.

On "Rockin' Me," Miller and his cohort of 28 years, backup singer/harmonica player/percussionist Norton Buffalo, were channeling the same energies and working together beautifully with their dueling vocals.

Earlier in the set, Miller covered Ray Charles' "I'm Gonna Move to the Outskirts of Town" and said, "He's been with me my whole life." The song, with Handy on sax, presented Miller in a strong and soulful light - something you don't get out of "Swingtown" or "Livin' in the USA," which opened his set. Miller was also in rare form during John Coltrane's "Mr. Day," which, thanks mostly to Handy, was the set's sole artfully opaque moment.

Earlier in the day, Lyle Lovett played to warmer environs and a less enthusiastic crowd. But Lovett's 90-minute set, which spanned country and Celtic worlds, was a solid effort that almost never lost its groove.

"Cute as a Bug" and "My Baby Don't Tolerate" came early in tight, carefully wrapped packages. "Working Too Hard," a classic working-class song about mistrust, came later and found Lovett hitting his twangy stride.

Lovett is all about storytelling as heard via the simple accent of his characters. When he's not singing about his baby, he's singing about his coffee. And when the java's not on his mind, he's usually spinning a tale about life on the road or the view from outside his window.

It's those everyday observations that define him and his work. On Sunday he mused about Aspen being "the most dog-friendly city in the whole world." He met a few of them Sunday, he said, tied to trees outside restaurants as their owners ate and drank. "The dogs never seemed to mind," he said. "They were cool, just sitting there and waiting."

The festival wraps up today with performances by Cake and Lucinda Williams.

*Pop music writer Ricardo Baca can be reached at 303-820-1394 or [rbaca@denverpost.com](mailto:rbaca@denverpost.com).*

# The Denver Post

## Williams, Cake give a mellow finale to festival

By Ricardo Baca  
Denver Post Pop Music Critic

**Tuesday, September 07, 2004 - Snowmass** - I've always thought of Lucinda Williams' music as the ideal soundtrack for a calm Sunday evening spent with Jack Daniel's or a nice pinot gris.

But Labor Day Monday isn't a bad idea either.

Williams headlined the closing night of Jazz Aspen Snowmass on Monday with a stellar set that started with the volume turned to quiet country and finished with the knob raging at 11 on the blues rock dial.

She, along with Cake and Robert Randolph & the Family Band, was a smart antidote for the festival's last day, which drew about 5,000 this year - less than half Friday night's record-setting attendance.

Williams was the guts and glory of the evening, but Cake went the distance and left the biggest impression. Lead speaker-singer John McCrea worked his way through a handful of material from the band's first album including "Is This Love," "Ruby Sees All" and "Comanche."

After "Comanche," the singer voiced his confusion about the festival's excessive catering to its patrons and VIPs, which includes a healthy portion of the stagefront audience area marked off for the important people, most of whom weren't feeling Cake's early evening vibe.

"Why aren't there more people sitting over here?" McCrea asked, motioning toward the near-empty VIP half of the crowd, which looked meager compared with the other half, packed with enthusiastic general admissioners out for the whole day. "Are we not good enough for this clientele?"

The GA crowd loved it, but it made him sad, McCrea said, turning toward the GA side and deadpanning, "This is the way I should be facing. ... This is more life-affirming."

A verbal spat erupted between the singer and a VIP in a fluorescent green shirt, but McCrea brought it to a halt by dedicating "Sheep Go to Heaven" to the man.

Williams' set was less controversial and more straightforward. It was country music coming straight from one of the best lyricists in the game. Many in the crowd simply sat back - not complacently, but listening intently - as she cooed and howled her way through tracks including "Drunken Angel," which started her set, and "Are You Down," a track she said was inspired by the music of Sade that began her encore more than 90 minutes later.

"Ventura," a sleepy ditty in the key of melancholy, provided a glimpse of where Williams now resides. It's from her most recent record, "World Without Tears," and it proves again her lyrical dexterity with prose like, "I wanna watch the ocean bend/The edges of the sun, then/I wanna get swallowed up/In an ocean of love."

McCrea's lyrics, though known for their irony, are maturing - something that was obvious via the new songs he threw down on Monday at Jazz Aspen Snowmass and also late night Sunday at the Mountain Dragon bar in Snowmass, where the band played a righteous surprise show. Between the two sets - with the small club show being more intimate and off-the-cuff and the festival gig being more littered with the expected - Cake played five songs from its upcoming album "Pressure Chief," due out Oct. 5.

Of the five, "Waiting" and "Tougher Than It Is" sounded like major steps forward for Cake both lyrically and sonically. Both were smart and detached, two of McCrea's signatures, but they also flowed melodically in a way that shows Cake's progression.

"Wheels" and "No Phone" were less creative and more of the "Prolonging The Magic" mold, and "Carbon Monoxide," another new song, fell flat both nights.

*Pop music critic Ricardo Baca can be reached at 303-820-1394 or [rbaca@denverpost.com](mailto:rbaca@denverpost.com).*